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THE ART OF THOMAS HARDY.¹

In the first number of this REVIEW we made the somewhat hazardous attempt to sum up what we believed to be the chief characteristics of the work and genius of the great novelist whose name again stands at the top of our pages. "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" was then about a year old; but people had not tired of praising or condemning it. Among the judicious it was recognized that Mr. Hardy had entered upon a new phase of his career and that he had come to stay; among the philistines there was the usual recalcitrant wailing that accompanies such an event. Before the appearance of our article the number of serious attempts to study the evolution of Mr. Hardy's genius might have been counted on the fingers of one hand. Now mention is constantly made of him in literary journals and two serious books have been written about him. The Stevensonians have, of course, come to the front of late on account of their hero's sad death, and the adherents of Mr. Meredith have always to be reckoned with, but Dr. Robertson Nicoll showed his usual sagacity and sense of present needs when he devoted the first volume of his new series, "Contemporary Writers", to the shy Wessex recluse who stands at the head of the English novelists of the day and at the head of all English men of letters of our generation with the exception of Mr. Swinburne. We may trust, therefore, that it was a lucky omen when THE SEWANEE REVIEW began its modest career with the name of Thomas

¹ *The Art of Thomas Hardy* by Lionel Johnson [with a *Bibliography* by John Lane.] London: Elkin Matthews and John Lane, 1894.

Thomas Hardy by Annie Macdonell. [*Contemporary Writers*.] New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1895.

Thomas Hardy's Works. The Wessex Novels, vols. I. and II. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Far From the Madding Crowd*. London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1895. *Life's Little Ironies*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1894.

Hardy upon its opening page; and it is with peculiar pleasure that we devote a portion of this concluding number of our third volume to a brief notice of two recent tributes to Mr. Hardy's genius as well as to a slight appreciation of his two latest works. A further element of timeliness is given to our review by the fact that a uniform edition of Mr. Hardy's works has just begun to appear in monthly volumes bearing the imprint of that well-known London firm, Messrs. Osgood, McIlvaine & Company. The lover of Mr. Hardy could desire nothing more delightful than these comely volumes with their exquisite etchings, their useful map of Wessex, and their satisfactory paper and press work. An American edition will doubtless follow soon and we shall be glad if the publishers take the English one as a model.

If Mr. Hardy were not a great writer, Mr. Lionel Johnson's serious and involved way of approaching his subject would convince most ordinary readers of the fact. Rarely has such an amount of erudition, such a talent for polished if not for fine writing, such a generous though chastened enthusiasm been devoted by any young writer to the worship and service of his master. The "breezy paragraph" of the modern editor is not for Mr. Johnson; not for him the essay expanded into a monograph that serves even such critics as Mr. William Sharp when writing about such a man as Browning. A note book and pencil would be disdained by our new critic. He will write about Mr. Hardy in a well-stocked library that he may quote at pleasure from Euripides or Newman, he will write only on the best of paper and with a genuine goose-quill. For all of which Mr. Johnson has our wondering admiration and our hearty and sincere thanks; for he has produced a worthy book about a great man. Perhaps his erudition is not worn as lightly as it might be, and perhaps his style shows a too conscious straining after urbanity and distinction. But erudition and urbanity are too rare in contemporary English criticism—too rare anywhere but in France—to be re-

ceived otherwise than gratefully. Mr. Johnson, we feel sure, will trust more to his own good judgment in the future and rely less upon quotation and allusion; and his labor upon his verses (for he is a new poet) will inevitably un-stiffen his style. But it is time to inquire what our critic has to say about his author.

A systematic treatise was not in Mr. Johnson's mind when he conceived the idea of his book, and perhaps it is too early to expect a rounded study of a writer who has as many years of work left as Mr. Hardy presumably has. Still a little more system displayed in an essay bringing out chronologically the evolution of the novelist's genius might have rendered the volume more serviceable to the average reader; for, as it is, it is only those who like Mr. Johnson regard Thomas Hardy as a master and know his work thoroughly, that can profit greatly from the six essays so carefully elaborated here. These essays are entitled "Critical Preliminaries," "Design and Composition," "Wessex," "Country Folk," "Characters of Men and Women," "Sincerity in Art."

The first essay has little enough to do with Mr. Hardy but is quite interesting in its suggestive treatment of the development of English fiction, and indirectly impresses the reader with a sense of Mr. Hardy's greatness, if he is worthy of such ponderous critical apparatus. In the second essay Mr. Johnson proves himself to belong to the innermost circle of Hardyites, by his frank avowal that he holds "The Return of the Native" to be the greatest of the Wessex novels. While we cannot agree with him, we cannot resist quoting with approbation the sentence in which he describes this novel as opening "with a chapter of descriptive writing to which I can find no just parallel save certain periods of Lucretius: those tremendous periods, where single words seem to gather out of the deep, and to reverberate like the thunder." This tribute to the grandeur of the description of Egdon Heath is as apt and satisfying as the accompanying tribute to the majesty of Lucretius

when he is at his best. The same essay, however, brings out forcibly the fact that Mr. Hardy's unity of design precludes the possibility of judging him fairly by detached passages, even by such a magnificent piece of description as that which opens this Wessex tragedy. Mr. Johnson further shows that his favorite writer cannot lie under the charge of insular arrogance, that on the contrary it may be said of him: "Here is work, done after the best English manner: and its truth to nature, its truth to art are universal." But he is too true a critic not to feel that Mr. Hardy is at times open to the charge of unartistic extravagance, especially in such stories as "A Laodicean," "The Hand of Ethelberta," and "Two on a Tower." The essay concludes with a careful and sympathetic analysis of the style that is almost as distinctive of the Wessex novels as is their subject matter.

The sections devoted to "Wessex" and "Country Folk" require little notice here. They are interesting, if discursive, and show that Mr. Johnson has not only read his Hardy diligently, but been himself a pilgrim to the primitive region that the great novelist has practically discovered. But even a pilgrim to Roman Britain might have spared us such an archaism as "awoken" in a work intended to be read in lands that the Wessex peasant has hardly so much as heard of.

The essay on "Characters of Men and Women" will provoke few or no protests from Mr. Hardy's admirers, although it will scarcely serve them greatly. One may perhaps object to the description of Eustacia Vye as "an imperial recluse, of a grandeur equal to that of Egdon itself," but one has little fault to find with the treatment of Michael Henchard, protagonist of that powerful tragedy "The Mayor of Casterbridge," a book which if we still find it uncanny, we are inclined to rate more highly the oftener we read it.

The sixth and last essay, entitled "Sincerity in Art," is perhaps the most interesting in the volume, owing to the fact that it stimulates the reader more strongly either to assent

or dissent. It is mainly taken up with an analysis of "Tess" and of Mr. Hardy's attitude toward nature and man. While thoroughly alive to the greatness of what we ourselves must consider not only its author's masterpiece, but the greatest novel of our generation, Mr. Johnson cannot bring himself to overlook what he regards as the serious imperfections of the book as a study of life. He is thoroughly honest in letting us see that it is his faith as a devout Romanist that prevents him from understanding, much less sympathizing with Mr. Hardy's grim if not pessimistic view of the relations between nature and society. He upholds his side in this perennial conflict of ideas and theories with much sincerity, forcibleness, and urbanity. If he leaves the reader with the feeling that Mr. Hardy's views are more in accord with the trend of modern thought, he also leaves the impression of himself as a generous and courteous critic. In one point only does it seem to us that he fails signally to accomplish his purpose — when he attempts to show that "Tess" is not a genuine tragedy, because, owing to the mechanical destiny Mr. Hardy has created for his heroine, "our pity and our fear are not purified merely: they are destroyed, and no room is left for them." This criticism appears to miss the real mainspring of the tragic emotions set at work by the moving story. It is a true tragedy, because we cannot help believing that under better social conditions Tess might have been far less the sport of a cruel fate. Our pity and fear are purged, and we arise with the determination to devote our best efforts to the emancipation of our race from every fetter of cramping and ignoble custom. A better test of a true tragedy it would be hard to conceive. But if Mr. Johnson has been unjust to "Tess" and too enthusiastic for "The Return of the Native", he has surely justified his admiration for Mr. Hardy, and rendered fitting and noble tribute to a great and conscientious artist.

We must now pass to a brief consideration of Miss Macdonell's little book, but before doing so we cannot for-

bear expressing our thanks for Mr. John Lane's admirable bibliography which will be invaluable to all Hardy students, as well as for the republication of our author's note on William Barnes and his Wessex ballad, "The Fire at Tranter Sweatley's." This last is the only poem that Mr. Hardy is said to have saved from his youthful work. We regret this not so much because of the quality of the ballad preserved for us, as because of the plain indications of poetic power to be found scattered through his writings, especially in "Under the Greenwood Tree." Mr. William Strang's etching of the novelist which forms a frontispiece to the volume is good but inferior to that by Mr. Macbeth-Rae-burn which appears in the new edition of "Tess."

Miss Macdonell's tribute to Mr. Hardy's genius takes the form of a little book of ten chapters, some of which treat of topics not fully developed in the more thoughtful and important monograph of Mr. Johnson. For example, Chapters II and III, entitled "The Progress of a Novelist," attempt to give the consecutive account of the development of our author's genius that we desired of the latter critic. Miss Macdonell's chapters by no means exhaust the subject—indeed her whole book is a slight performance—but she does give information that will be useful to the reader who does not know his Hardy well. She has, too, a chapter on the humor displayed in the novels, which is a topic Mr. Johnson might have treated more fully. There are of course chapters on "Men and Women," on Mr. Hardy as "Prose Writer" and as "Painter of Nature," as well as one on "Wessex" which smacks too much of a guide book and has little of the charm of Mr. Johnson's essay on the same subject. But Miss Macdonell knows her Hardy, and says many sensible things about him in a clear if not an attractive style. She not only knows Mr. Hardy but she likes him, which cannot be predicated of most women, and she understands "Tess." Of criticism in the true sense of the word there is very little, but one would hardly look for much from a writer who thinks that one can know one's

Balzac and yet skip enough in one's reading to amount to several volumes. If there is any writer of prose fiction for whom this skipping method is inadmissible, it is Balzac, that master of description by means of the multiplication and the accumulation of details. Of definite information about Mr. Hardy himself the volume is equally destitute, but for this no blame can attach to Miss Macdonell, who could not be expected to resolve herself into a reporter and follow her author into his Wessex retirement. Yet if there is little criticism of value and little biographical information in Miss Macdonell's tiny but still padded volume, it will nevertheless do good work as a convenient guide to the novels, and may be safely recommended for this purpose.

Miss Macdonell, writing quite recently, has an opportunity to notice the work done by Mr. Hardy since the publication of "Tess," which may now occupy us for a moment, and she actually has a good word to say for "The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved," which appeared as a serial after the publication of its author's masterpiece, but has not yet been sent forth in book form. We can forgive her commendation, only when we remember her enthusiasm for that pure historical idyl, "The Trumpet Major." The passage from such a story as "Tess" to such a story as "The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved" is comparable to no change of temperature in the physical world. The atmosphere of "Tess" is bracing, that of the tale that followed it is miasmatic. Being the work of a great writer, it should be obtainable in book form (it is not announced in the new uniform edition); but judged in itself and in its relations to the general world of readers, it should remain in its serial form forever. Why Mr. Hardy should have felt called upon to write it except to relieve himself of the strain "Tess" caused his powers and faculties, is hard to conceive. Perhaps the long and dangerous illness which prostrated him in 1892 may furnish some explanation. There is, of course, no lack of power in the story, no lack of grim realism and Mephistophelian irony. The hero is a sort of *fin de siècle* Shelley with none of

Shelley's perennial charm. Like Shelley, Jocelyn Pearston is an artist who loves the beautiful, especially when it is embodied in a female form. Like Shelley, he is constantly thinking that he has found this embodiment and as constantly finding that his new idol has feet of the commonest clay. He runs away from one girl, marries another, lives a cat-and-dog life with her and is separated, then falls in love with the daughter of the woman he jilted, finds that she is already married, and afterwards, a youth of fifty-nine, finally marries her daughter (grandaughter of his first flame), having been constant to one family at least for three generations, and, perhaps, as Mr. Hardy would have us believe, to his ideal. Surely the sub-title of this story, "A Sketch of a Temperament," is an appropriate one. His eighteen-year-old wife, Avice the Third, marries him to please her mother, deserting her lover in her devotion to her parent. Our modern Shelley, after some disagreeable experiences, and with notions of marriage little saner than those his prototype, resolves to get out of the way and give the young people a chance. He does not follow Shelley's example and drive Avice to suicide, but tries it himself abortively and wakes up to find himself being nursed by his first wife whom he had thought dead. His "Pursuit of the Beautiful" has landed him exactly at the spot he set out from, only his new-found wife, who had once been beautiful, is now a hag. With his grim laugh at his own discomfiture the story closes. That it has a moral it is impossible to deny; that it has any charm, it is impossible to affirm. But a moral without charm is worthless, because it is a moral that fails to win us; and if Mr. Hardy disclaim all moral purpose, he must still show us how a bizarre extravagance can take the place of truth to nature in a work of art. For we have a right to expect from Mr. Hardy's pen at all times nothing less than a work of art.

Our author's only work of importance since the publication of the last mentioned story is the volume called "Life's Little Ironies: A Set of Tales with Some Collo-

quial Sketches Entitled a Few Crusted Characters." Most of these stories had seen the light in various periodicals; they were collected into a volume in 1894. While it is impossible not to wish that Mr. Hardy had followed up "Tess" with a novel of equal power and pathos (we cannot speak of "Hearts Insurgent," which is still running as a serial), we must confess that we would not part with this admirable collection of tales now that we have got it. While nothing in the volume is as substantial in length and possibly in workmanship as any of the five tales that made up the "Wessex Tales" of 1888, we are not sure that the present collection is not, as a whole, nearly or quite equal to the former. The ironical title is fully justified in the half sad, half comic realism that pervades each story. In almost every tale one or more human beings may be found struggling in the meshes of fate, their creator standing by with a grim but not unkindly smile apparent on his face. Yet beneath all there is a sound ethical principle at play which the careful reader will disentangle. With the sharp, direct realism is mixed a slight but definite trace of poetic idealism that reminds one of the Hardy of earlier years, and there is, especially in the last set of stories, a welling up of the old humor. We may be permitted to doubt whether a consistent optimist would be able to repress a frown at the sardonic close of such stories as a "A Son's Veto" and "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions," we doubt even whether he would admit without grudging the flawless art with which they are told; but we do not see how anyone can fail to laugh and grow fat over his new found acquaintances, Mr. Hardy's "Crusted Characters." This is another Wessex "Decameron," the tales being told in a carrier's van by different villagers for the delectation of a former inhabitant returning after a lapse of years to his youthful haunts. The charm of "A Group of Noble Dames," that book *sui generis*, is absent, but the charm of a perennial humor is surely present in such stories as "Tony Kytes, the Arch-Deceiver," and "Absentmindedness in a Parish Choir."

Whether now Mr. Hardy has reached his culmination in "Tess" and is slowly going down to the table-land or the valleys haunted by genius that has passed its prime, we cannot pretend to say, because we cannot possibly know. His artistic powers are fully developed and firmly fixed, and Wessex and the human heart are still ready to furnish him with subject matter. But to every artist there comes a time when brush, and chisel, and pen fail more or less to do the bidding of the directing brain and spirit. This the artist recognizes with the embittered conviction that brain and spirit were never more alive, never more completely endowed. It is the same old ironic game of life and death being played out in the highest sphere that we have knowledge of. Whether it has begun with Mr. Hardy we know not, but if it has, he can console himself with the thought that the feet now turned toward the valleys have stood upon the mountain tops. For Mr. Hardy is a great artist, and the critics whose works we have been reviewing are but the forerunners of many that in time to come will study his works and call him master.